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ABSTRACT

This brief focuses on assessment issues for American Indian and Alaska Native (collectively referred to as "Native") students, as well as other pedagogical issues related to improved teaching and educational outcomes. Although traditional Native educational strategies emphasize cooperation, experiential learning, and reflection, Native students continue to be at a disadvantage in the classroom. The reasons lie in several intersecting realities: troubled historical relations between tribes and the federal government affecting Native schooling, ongoing educational practices that ignore or devalue cultural ways of knowing, and the dearth of American Indian and Alaska Native teachers. Understanding the school performance of Native students requires a sociocultural perspective that takes into account differences between community and school in social and cultural context, the unconscious nature of these contexts, effects on student learning and organization of knowledge, and implications for effective instructional styles and student evaluation. Despite supportive federal legislation, a repertoire of culturally specific instruments to assess Native student performance does not exist. Standardized norm-referenced tests present such difficulties as inappropriate content, time pressures, reliance on verbal information, basic premises of multiple-choice testing, and alien nature of formal on-demand testing. Indeed, achievement tests can be seen as merely indices of the student's acculturation to Western cultural knowledge and conventions for displaying knowledge. More culturally responsive assessment incorporates content reflecting local contexts and experiences, uses procedures that reflect local ways of thinking and learning, and provides students with options. Other concerns related to the question of whose standards are appropriate, proper interpretation and use of test data, and the value of alternative assessments. (SV)

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Issues in Cross-Cultural Assessment: American Indian and Alaska Native Students

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This *Brief* explores some of the historical and sociocultural factors that have affected the schooling of American Indians and Alaska Natives, with a view to identifying broad strategies for improving educational outcomes for these students. Improved learning, of course, can be demonstrated only through appropriate assessment practices; yet the best assessment system is of little help unless it is accompanied by — or prompts — improved teaching. So, while this brief focuses primarily on assessment issues for Native* students, it also touches on other pedagogical issues for those same students. (Table 1 offers background information on Native students and communities, which readers may find helpful.)

What Are the Issues?

A Current Problem with a Historical Legacy

Native peoples of the Americas have rich histories and cultural heritages that have always served as a foundation for preparing future generations for meaningful and productive life. Traditionally, Native elders took on much of the responsibility for teaching new generations the skills, traditions and knowledge of their people. In everyday situations, children were taught to work cooperatively and collectively and to reflect on what they were learning from life's daily "lessons." These strategies served to increase the impact of the elders' words about the particular "lesson" inherent in a given experience, thus increasing its power. This experiential, hands-on education in a real-world context featured the most authentic assessment system possible: the daily challenges of life itself. Performance on the various assessment tasks determined whether people would live or die and whether a tribe's culture would survive.

Today, Native elders continue to shoulder the same responsibilities, using traditional methods to prepare younger generations for success in their own communities and to instill in them culturally-based "funds of knowledge." (Moll, Amati, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992). Their educational strategies — emphasizing cooperation and reflection in a meaningful context — are remarkably similar to those promoted in current educational reform agendas. One might assume, therefore, that Native students would have a decided advantage in today's classrooms. Unfortunately, the opposite is more true.

The reasons lie in several intersecting realities:

- often troubled historical relations between tribes and the federal government affecting the schooling of Native students;
- ongoing educational practices that reflect little understanding or valuing of the cultural ways of knowing and learning of Native communities; and
- the dearth of American Indian and Alaska Native teachers.

Though most Native students now attend local public schools, in the past most received their formal education at federally supported Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. And though at times government policies supported maintenance of Native languages and cultures, more often than not they promoted assimilation to a Euro-American way of life and rejection of Native languages. For example, children were removed from their communities and placed in boarding schools far from home — sometimes several states away. Such policies continued well into the middle of this century, leaving Native communities with deeply conflicted feelings about education. In these communities, educators' expectations for parental involvement and commitment to the goals of schooling must be tempered by an awareness of the profound ambivalence that many parents feel as a result of their own experiences with school.

Common practices of many schools have either directly or indirectly devalued Native ways of life. A few decades ago, such practices were, perhaps, more blatantly disrespectful: cutting students' hair without consent, physically punishing students for using their Native languages, forcing the study and practice of Christianity against parents' wishes and, in general, excising from children's lives anything connoting "Indianness" (Chavers & Locke, 1989, p. 6). But current curricula and pedagogies (including assessment practices) that make no connections to the cultures, histories and languages of Native students are similarly alienating. By contrast, curricula that support the building of cultural identity has been associated with lower dropout rates (Eberhard, 1989) and improved

* We use the term "Native" to refer to both American Indian and Alaska Native peoples and, at times, to indigenous peoples of Canada. It is important to recognize that although Native cultures share many common values and practices, there are also distinct differences across groups. At the same time, Native students as a whole share similar experiences in schools as they are run today.

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Table 1
Some Important Facts about American Indians and Alaska Natives

- Approximately two million people identify themselves as American Indians and Alaska Natives.
- The largest numbers of American Indians and Alaska Natives live in Oklahoma, California, and Arizona.
- There are 550 federally-recognized tribes, among which are 223 Alaska Native villages.
- The Native population of Alaska constitutes 15.6 percent of the state's total population of .55 million.
- There are approximately 250 remaining American Indian and Alaska Native languages, about half on the verge of extinction.
- Officially reversing earlier policies, the Native American Languages Act of 1990 makes it a policy to "preserve, protect, and promote the rights and freedoms of Native Americans to use, practice, and develop Native American Languages."
- There are approximately 400,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students in grades K-12.
- About 44,000 students (10 percent) attend Bureau of Indian Affairs schools; most of the remainder attend public schools.
- There are 28 tribally-controlled colleges with an enrollment of more than 7,000 students.
- The Office of Indian Education (in the U.S. Dept. of Education) funds and oversees programs that provide services to about 380,000 American Indian and Alaska Native students (Title V programs).

Sources: Utter, 1993
B.I.A., 1994

literacy skills among Native students (George & Just, 1992; Teachers' Panel, 1994).

Also affecting the schooling of these students has been the shortage of Native teachers. When teacher and students have no shared cultural identity, a teacher has less to go on in making decisions about what is appropriate to teach students and how to effectively teach it. In such circumstances, the teacher is also less able to accurately interpret students' motives and behavior. By contrast, a teacher who shares the culture of his students is more likely to convey subject content within a context of familiar cultural experiences and local values. Better able to recognize students' personal and cultural strengths, that teacher is also likely to communicate more meaningfully (Nelson-Barber, 1991). Thus, the educational success of Native students is further hindered by the small number of Native teachers available. This dearth results in part from higher education programs that are unresponsive to the needs of Native students; the nature of college entrance and certification testing; and the general lack of understanding about certain culturally-based pedagogical practices employed by Native teachers, such as their practice of sharing classroom control with students rather than exerting unilateral control themselves.

Need for a Sociocultural Perspective on Classroom Learning

Understanding the school performance of Native students requires moving beyond a psycho-educational framework that focuses on individual cognition to a sociocultural perspective. Children are not merely "information-processing machine[s]" (Cole & Bruner, 1971, p. 872). Their orientation to the types of learning, knowledge and ways of thinking and doing valued by their community is not just an individual psychological process. It is also a multi-layered social process. In fact, many cognitive psychologists now challenge the view that a student's cognitive functioning can be evaluated outside a context that is meaningful to the student and without consideration for the student's intent or purpose when participating in an activity. Studies show that when children do not understand the intent of a question or the teacher's purpose in asking it, for example, they may respond in ways that do not reveal what they actually know (Resnick, 1991).

Schooling, too, takes place in a social context. But the expectations and demands of school compared to home may be very different, especially for Native students who live in traditional communities. Adding to the potential for misunderstanding among students and teachers is that the norms and values of any community are rarely stated explicitly. Rather they are inherent in the life of the community, seldom rising to a level of conscious awareness for anyone.

Conventions of language use are a case in point. Children learn not only the vocabulary and grammar of their home languages, but how to use language for different purposes and within different social situations. For example, in many Native communities, when several people are together, it is the norm to speak to the group as a whole rather than addressing a comment or posing a question to an individual (cf. Swisher & Deyhle, 1992). It is also considered inappropriate for one person to suggest that he or she is better than another or to make someone else uncomfortable by "showing him up." It is easy to imagine how these norms might clash with the norms of a typical classroom in which teachers address questions to individual students and publicly evaluate their responses.

Effective Instructional Styles

Many studies of Native students in classrooms have shown how typical instructional approaches result in students' adopting a "mask of silence" (Dumont, 1972, p. 346). In an experimental summer program for Sioux children, Dumont found that "the more teaching and learning was moved into the cultural complex of the Sioux community, the more students talked, and as it moved within the cultural complex of the school, the more silent they became" (Dumont, 1972, p. 347). In other words, the children's relative participation or silence was directly related to how teacher-student and student-student learning exchanges were structured. When teachers used conventional non-Native ways of

exercising authority and enforced a "school" definition of learning (far removed from the experiential learning promoted within the community), students simply stopped talking and otherwise refused to participate.

More recently, observations of Inuit, Cree and Mohawk teachers revealed that, unlike non-Native teachers, they tended to structure classrooms so children learned from each other as well as from the teacher (McAlpine & Taylor, 1993). Teachers did not seem to exercise any overt social control, choosing instead to share control with their students, who had great latitude to interact with peers. Although teachers from the different Native groups did not use all the same procedures and practices to the same degree, the practices mentioned above were observed in all classrooms.

Researchers Eriks-Brophy and Crago (1993) have studied how successful Inuit teachers in northern Quebec adapted classroom discourse practices to harmonize with their students' communication patterns. Rather than asking individual students to answer questions, teachers allowed the whole group to call out answers. At times, an individual student would respond, and the group would repeat the response in chorus. In addition, teachers did not always directly evaluate the correctness of the group's response after each question. Instead, they gave indirect feedback through the ways in which they continued the discussion, e.g., by eliciting further contributions or through non-verbal cues.

Differences between Native and non-Native approaches to acquiring and organizing knowledge also have implications for teaching, assessment and learning. As noted above, in Native communities children are usually expected to learn through observation and direct experience rather than from explicit verbal instruction. Concepts to be learned are seen as interconnected, and skills are learned in a meaningful context — which, according to proponents of apprenticeship models and situated cognition, would be appropriate for all students (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).

Many education reformers are now calling for a constructivist approach that recognizes students as active learners who, to learn at the deepest levels, must connect classroom experiences to their existing knowledge structures, which derive, in part, from real-world experiences. Many are also advocating interdisciplinary instruction. In fact, an integrated, more holistic approach to education is potentially very compatible with traditional Native ways of learning. The kind of assessment that logically follows from such instruction would also occur in a meaningful context — ideally, embedded in or continuous with instruction. The type of assessment tools that artificially isolate disparate bits of information — as do most multiple choice tests, for example — is compatible neither with the constructivist approach nor with Native ways of demonstrating understanding or skill. Similarly, for Native students, reliance on questioning or recitation for both instruction and assessment is incongruous with cultural norms (Swisher & Deyhle, 1992).

Adaptability of Cultures

Current inquiry into the norms for knowing and learning in diverse communities (whether defined in linguistic, ethnic, racial, gender or even occupational terms) does not originate in concern about political correctness. Rather, it grows out of an understanding that communities of people have developed systems and approaches that work for them in their particular circumstances. Just as linguistic research has led to the belief that there are no "primitive languages" — that *all* languages are sophisticated and flexible enough to communicate any thought their speakers need to express — anthropological research has led to the notion of "psychic unity" (Cole & Bruner, 1971), which says that cognitive capacity is constant across all populations of people. Differences arise simply because diverse groups organize and categorize the world differently, according to their specific needs. "By this view, different conclusions about the world are the result of . . . different, but equally logical, ways of cutting up the world of experience. From this perspective, descriptions of the 'disorganization' of minorities would be highly suspect, this suspicion arising in connection with questions like, 'disorganized from whose point of view?' "(Cole & Bruner, 1971, p. 872).

For cultures to have survived, they have necessarily evolved cognitive tools to aid memory or management of the environment — tools that suit local purposes, such as mathematical and writing systems, computational devices and maps. "Cognitive tools embody a culture's intellectual history; they have theories built into them, and users accept these theories — albeit often unknowingly — when they use these tools" (Resnick, 1991, p. 7). These tools facilitate thinking and problem-solving, but in certain ways, they are also constraining. Thus, Native students who are expected to move from one set of cognitive tools/theories/approaches to another may well need explicit instruction on how to do so.

Given all this, it is clear that to understand a student's performance on a given task, one must consider how the demands of the task intersect with his or her own ways of knowing, approach to problem-solving and familiarity with the cognitive tools required to complete the task (Cole & Scribner, 1974). An inadequate performance on a task does not necessarily imply lack of competence, particularly when the task is not culturally congruent. Even something as basic as ability to memorize a list of items is affected by familiarity with items on the list and purpose for remembering it.

Misguided Assumptions

The concept of intellectual equality of all human populations, though accepted by those who have studied multiple cultures, may not be broadly accepted among all non-anthropologists, including teachers. After all, until recently, the United States had a history of political, educational and social actions based on a very different set of beliefs: that some cultures are inferior to others intellectually; that European and Euro-American cultures are more advanced than most others; that some peoples are "primitive" and their languages less developed. In the past such beliefs rationalized wholesale destruction of "less developed" Native societies; imposition of "superior" ideologies and of educational curricula promoting mainstream views; denigra-

tion and supplanting of Native languages with European languages; and other social practices that serve to keep "less developed" peoples in lower social and educational tracks. To grasp what has brought American Indian and Alaska Native students to their current status in the American educational system, we must be aware of and reevaluate some of these underlying beliefs and practices that have been based on those beliefs.

What Are the Assessment *Issues?*

Despite questions about the validity of existing tests for Native students, this population is subjected to a great deal of testing. Among those tests frequently administered are screening, intelligence, placement/diagnostic, achievement, attitude, language proficiency, reading, personality and competency (Chavers & Locke, 1989). Countless decisions are based on the results. As long ago as 1979, federal legislation was directed at improving testing practices for Native students — with little apparent consequence. In 1988, the Indian Education Act made provisions for "a program of research and development to provide accurate and culturally specific assessment instruments to measure student performance in cooperation with Tribes and Alaska Native entities" (Chavers & Locke, 1989, pp. 18-19). To date, however, there is no repertoire of standardized tests in Native languages or that draw on Native cultural content and learning processes. Still, current reforms in student assessment, both at the statewide and classroom level, have some potential for remedying the situation.

Factors Affecting Native Students' Test Performance

Native teachers have long believed that existing tests do not reflect what they have been teaching or their students have been learning (Nelson-Barber & Mitchell, 1992; Teachers' Panel, 1994). Standardized, norm-referenced tests have presented the most obvious difficulties:

- content may be inappropriate, because common experience is wrongly presumed, jeopardizing construct validity (i.e., the ability of the assessment tool to test what it purports to test);
- the timed nature of the tests penalizes students from communities that view time differently or value reflection over quick response;
- reliance on verbal information and representation to the near exclusion of nonverbal, visual information and representation is culturally incongruous; and
- formal, on-demand testing is alien to Native ways of demonstrating learning.

Inappropriate content is in some ways the most concrete and obvious source of bias. A panel of Native teachers recently convened to discuss assessment issues offered the following examples. Asking Native students to read a passage about a birthday party (an event most White, middle class children of school age have experienced many times) and relate it to their own experience may not be appropriate. Similarly, fairy tales about kings, queens and princes, while perhaps familiar bedtime fare for suburban children, are not at all familiar to many Native children (Teachers' Panel, 1994). When common experience is wrongly assumed and students are asked to respond to entirely unfamiliar content, it is difficult to know what is being assessed. In such cases, construct validity is suspect. Is the student being assessed on his or her ability to learn — or on familiarity with the White middle class experience?

Time pressures can also inhibit the successful performance of Native students. Some teachers say their Native students need additional time to process the more complex language used in new performance assessments, language that may be very different from that to which they are accustomed (Teachers' Panel, 1994, among others). For many Native students, processing of test language is further complicated by the fact that English is their second language. Even those who speak English as a first language are likely to speak a dialect whose syntax and conventions of use are strongly influenced by the Native language of their community. Time issues notwithstanding, heavy reliance on language for both communicating information and representing knowledge is simply not the norm in many Native communities. Therefore, strictly verbal tests may penalize Native students.

Many Native students also find themselves in conflict with the basic premises of many assessments: for example, the idea, inherent in all multiple choice tests, that only one answer can be right. When asked in interviews which tests they preferred, women Native graduate students opted for essay tests, explaining that the idea of choosing only one answer over all others is antithetical to their way of thinking. Instead, they said, they felt the need to deliberate and give full consideration to all alternatives (Macias, 1989).

Finally, studies in numerous Native communities have shown that on-demand assessment of children's learning is not customary (Swisher & Deyhle, 1992). Children tend to have opportunities to learn privately and to practice on their own before performing in public; moreover, it is the student who determines when he or she is ready to perform. In Native communities, both adults and children are expected to maintain a respectful attitude toward any task, and it is considered disrespectful to attempt a task before one is relatively sure of doing it correctly (Swisher & Deyhle, 1992).

Other factors influencing test performance for Native students are: differences in learning style, conflicted motivation vis à vis investing in the school's value system, an aversion to competition and low expectations on the part of teachers (Neely & Shaughnessy, 1984; Brescia & Fortune, 1988).

Assessments as Cultural Events

In general, scores from cognitive tests standardized on a majority culture accurately predict academic success in the dominant culture's educational institutions (Cress, 1974). But this does not mean the scores are accurate measures of cognitive capacity or intelligence — a common misperception. They merely "reflect the interaction between capacity and the particular conditions of previous training and current test demands" (Cress, 1974, p. 16).

It can be argued that most achievement tests are merely indices of the degree to which students have been acculturated to Western cultural knowledge and conventions for displaying knowledge (Teachers' Panel, 1994). In fact, tests and assessments *are* cultural products or events. "[A]ssessment practice is part and parcel of a professional stance that is bound to middle-class culture and enmeshed with a larger social system that nourishes . . . ethnocentrism" (Dana, 1984, p. 41). For a test to be "culture-free" it would have to be "independent of experiences" (Deyhle, 1987).

The implication for Native students is clear. As reported by Native teachers, students living on reservations or in isolation from "mainstream" culture may not be able to make sense of the examples that non-Native teachers use in instruction. Furthermore, while teachers can build students' experience vicariously through thematic units that link their personal experiences with those of the wider world, in general, these students may have no other ready means to acquire the background information necessary for performing well on achievement tests.

Even the concept of "test" is not a cross-cultural universal. In her work with Navajo students, Deyhle (1987) has shown that some children acquire a concept of test much later than others. Whereas "Anglo" second-graders knew that good test performance was important and related to school success, Navajo second- and third-graders saw tests as events distinct from other classroom activities only by virtue of special procedures surrounding them: "You be quiet, put your books in the desk and he gives you a piece of paper you write on" and "Don't look at others' papers" (Deyhle, 1987, p. 100). Anticipating a test, non-Navajo students experienced some trepidation, while Navajo students said they felt "good" or "happy." In fact, according to Deyhle, some of their teachers (who were non-Native) actually created a "game-like" atmosphere for the Navajo children. Such apparently patronizing behavior clearly did not convey the importance of test performance. Results of studies in Alaska also suggest that rural teachers are skeptical of standardized tests and may communicate that belief to students (Parrett, 1988, among others).

It was evident from Deyhle's study that "Anglo" students entered school having been indoctrinated by their families about the importance of school and tests. This was simply not so for the traditionally-educated Navajo students in the study.

As Navajo students advance in school they learn that their performance is being judged. Unfortunately, according to Deyhle, they also learn that it is being judged as deficient, at which point, many reject the importance of displaying competence on tests. An historical review of the effects of testing on American Indian students reveals that tests are not regarded as important by many students or their parents; instead, they are viewed as "something to endure" or "something which holds students back and 'proves' that they are not worthy" (Chavers & Locke, 1989, pp. 15-16). If students do not take tests seriously, test results cannot be valid.

Cultural differences in how to approach a task also come into play in testing. When faced with the solitary task of writing a response to an assessment question, students who are accustomed to cooperating with each other and sharing information may not be able to proceed readily. "If you want their opinion, they want to sit and think and share with others," says Principal Joan Gilmore of Leupp Elementary School on the Navajo Reservation near Flagstaff, Arizona. Before these students can handle the state's Arizona Student Assessment Program tasks that require them to write on demand, she says, they need explicit practice with similar tasks. She also believes her students need more time to think and process than assessment developers have estimated.

Everything now known about assessment of Native students suggests that most assessment tools designed and used thus far have very little utility for revealing the learning of Native students. That recognition leads to some important questions: How valid is any decision based on the outcomes of these tests? Is it ethical to continue to make judgments about Native students' performances without understanding the sociocultural contexts in which they occur? What can be done to make assessment and evaluation of Native students both informative and equitable?

How Can Assessment of Native Students be Improved?

The factors that have contributed to serious problems in assessment of Native students are, themselves, suggestive of steps that can lead to more culturally responsive testing practices (see Table 2 for a summary).

Flexibility in Task Content

Improving assessment content is one obvious step, particularly at the classroom level where teachers have the freedom to tailor assessment to immediate needs. Assessments must incorporate content that reflects local contexts and experiences. Reading performance, for example, can be assessed using stories related to students' cultural knowledge, whether through historical narratives, legends or expository texts about scientific concepts demonstrable in community life.

Of course, such assessment should be tied to classroom curriculum and instruction. For example, Peach Springs District No. 8 on the Hualapai Reservation in Arizona has developed a curriculum based on themes meaningful to the community, such as ranch life (Hualapai Cultural and Environmental Curriculum, 1992). Having done so, it is in a better position to develop culturally-linked assessments than a district that relies on textbooks and a pre-packaged curriculum. Native teachers in Utah report that use of students' own language, stories and legends in instruction and in classroom assessment has been associated with improved scores on statewide tests. The bottom line? "Connect to students' experience. Use resources they already have" (Teachers' Panel, 1994).*

*For examples of culture-based assessments, see the video, "Successful Alternatives: Creating Assessment for Local Context," available from Far West Laboratory's Rural Schools Assistance Program.

Table 2
Guidelines for Culturally-Responsive Assessment for Native Students

- Link assessment to instruction. Avoid packaged tests.
- When possible, embed assessment in instruction.
- Tailor content of assessments to students' experiences in and out of school. Use cultural resources with which students are familiar.
- Use open-ended formats (not T/F or multiple choice).
- Allow time for students to process instructions and tackle various aspects of a task.
- Allow students opportunities to practice; give guided practice with multi-step problems.
- Allow time for reflection and deliberation.
- Allow students choices about when they will be assessed and how.
- Provide for cooperative as well as individual assessment opportunities. Allow cooperative problem-solving.
- Use forms of assessment that do not rely entirely on language or mastery of standard English (or uses of language unfamiliar to students).
- Give students explicit information on the purpose and meaning of any standardized tests they must take as well as strategies for responding.
- Treat students as whole people with valid experiences; language and culture are part of a student's identity and way of viewing the world.
- Always document the contexts preceding and surrounding assessment.

Flexibility in Ways of Assessing

More broadly, as Edmund Gordon has argued, "it must be possible to develop assessment procedures [that] are a more appropriate reflection of the ways in which people think, learn and work (Gordon, 1992, p. 2). Native teachers need the freedom to assess students in the ways they (teachers) deem valuable (Teachers' Panel, 1994) from "perspectives [that] reflect the life space and values of the learner" (Gordon, 1992, p. 6). Ideally, of course, Native teachers would also model appropriate assessment strategies for non-Native teachers.

Among the factors to consider in developing alternative assessments for Native students are: the format of questions (eliminating multiple choice, for example); how students are grouped (asking cooperative pairs of children to solve a problem rather than individuals, for example); the pace of an assessment task or process; how the language of the instructions is modified by teachers for students; and the language in which an assessment is conducted. Drawing on Native traditions of observation, modeling and experimentation, assessments can take forms other than purely linguistic. Native students may also benefit from explicit guided practice with multi-step assessments (Teachers' Panel, 1994).

Opportunities for Choice

Options and choices are a critical feature in any assessment system. Despite the best hopes and intentions of assessment designers, when it comes to assessments, one size does not fit all. Students, as well as teachers, need choices. In their own communities, Native students have much freedom of choice in how they go about learning from and with peers: to be successful classroom learners and to demonstrate their true learning, they may require similar freedom in the classroom . They may wish, for example, to take on assessment tasks in small cooperative groups rather than individually. Another element of choice has to do with decisions about when to assess. Much informal assessment is built into instruction; but for more formal summative assessment, it may be important to allow students some choice about when they are ready to be assessed.

Adherence to Standards — But Whose?

The federal Goals 2000 legislation calls for alignment of clear content and performance standards with instruction and assessment. Yet many communities of color, including Native communities, ask two important questions: Whose standards are we talking about? Is one set of standards appropriate for all students? Some call for locally developed standards to ensure compatibility with community values. Others believe it should be possible to set some very broad academic standards for all students and to measure success according to a common set of criteria, while, at the same time, remaining flexible about the specific means for addressing standards and determining student achievement. In the words of Gordon, education should strive for "universal standards and differential indicators" (Gordon, 1992, p. 5).

It remains to be seen whether this sanguine view will prevail. Ongoing issues of the marginalization of educators and parents from non-dominant communities are not resolved. For example, members of such groups may be asked to review assessments after they are virtually completed to ensure that they are unbiased; but these same parents and educators may not be included in the initial conceptualization of an assessment system or individual assessments. In Native communities, this marginalization is exacerbated by the shortage of Native teachers.

Standards, instruction and assessment must be aligned not only with each other, but with community values. To serve the needs of Native students, from the outset this process must include representatives of their community, from Native teachers and paraprofessionals to parents, elders and other community leaders. Obviously, the shortage of Native teachers has hampered this process in many locales. In districts with few or

no Native educators, non-Native staff must make extraordinary efforts to link with the Native community, to ensure that its members have the opportunity to participate in designing their children's education. Absent that link, a school or district risks mounting education programs that have no meaning or relevance to the very students it intends to serve.

Documentation of Contexts

For interpretations of student performances to be valid, those evaluating performance results must know in great detail the contexts of the student's learning and assessment, including: previous experiences in and out of school, including how a student has been educated outside of school; the languages of learning in and out of school; student affect and apparent effort; and the more immediate conditions surrounding the assessment itself, such as time allotted and teacher supports given. All this must be fully documented and described. Some of these elements can be documented by the students themselves, particularly older students.

Cautious Use of Assessment Data

Caution should be exercised when interpreting the meaning of Native students' performances. High-stakes decisions about grade promotion, graduation or program eligibility must be made on the basis of more than one type of assessment, in part because of the wide range of influences that affect Native students' performance. In the best possible situation, the school staff would include Native teachers who can help non-Native teachers understand and judge student work. As in any community, information flow between parents and teachers is also critical to understanding students' school performance.

Are Alternative Assessments the Answer to Equitable Assessment?

Much has been written recently about the potential of alternative assessments, such as portfolios, student exhibitions and performance tasks, to render more useful and equitable depictions of student progress and achievement. At least on the surface, these forms of assessment appear to have great promise because they can reflect the context of the student's educational experiences. For example, in theory, generic tasks that call on predictable sets of skills (such as reading and writing about one's response to a book or investigating and reporting on an environmental topic of importance to the community) can be designed with local contexts and student needs in mind. They can be embedded in instruction and "administered" in flexible ways.

When used as process tools to foster student reflection, decision-making and goal setting and engagement in learning, portfolios can be excellent vehicles for empowering students and representing their learning in terms they understand. While an individual portfolio entry reflects a student's developmental level at a given time, taken collectively, the entries depict learning over time in a way that ready-made tests cannot. For Native students, the portfolio's emphasis on success and growth rather than on what the student has failed to learn is especially important (Teachers' Panel, 1994). Another asset of portfolios is their link to the specific classroom curriculum and, potentially, to contexts of learning beyond the school. Exhibitions, which sometimes take the form of public demonstrations that are evaluated by community panels, are also very appropriate vehicles for bringing community values to bear on student assessment.

A Final Reflection

The last decade has seen positive changes in the relationship between tribes and the federal government, partly owing to Native communities' success in empowering themselves. At the same time, Native communities have asserted renewed interest in culturally valid curriculum. And, although the numbers of Native teachers are still small, there is increasing recognition that they, along with Native researchers and community members, must be tapped as sources of important expertise if schools are to improve their capacity to teach Native students.

By adopting a sociocultural orientation to understanding how Native students learn and know, educators can reflect more productively on classroom practices and their implications for Native students. Learning about the community, understanding the ways expectations of children are communicated, observing what children do at home — all are important for non-Native teachers (Teachers' Panel, 1994).

At least one caveat is warranted: even the most culturally-responsive instruction and assessment will not automatically translate into academic success for Native students. These students still face the challenge of developing their own identity in the face of the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands of a highly complex social context. Many may continue to experience personal dilemmas as they make conscious and unconscious decisions about how to bridge cultures. And issues of identity notwithstanding, mastering multiple cultures, alone, demands a great deal of time and energy, both in finite supply. For example, students must decide whether to study modern American Indian literature in addition to Shakespeare — the latter being required reading for Advanced Placement English (Teachers' Panel, 1994). Some students opt out of this bi-cultural agenda, either by conscious choice or by default.

However, even with these challenges, many Native students are thriving in programs that are based on culturally responsive curriculum, instruction and assessment. And — fortuitously — the current climate of reform provides all of us an opportunity to reexamine old assumptions and develop new bases of knowledge from which to re-create instruction and assessment.

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